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Transition Curriculum for Vessey Leadership Academy Leadership Application Project

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Leadership Application Project

Paul Terrence Gruber

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that the **Leadership Application Project of**

Paul Terrence Gruber

has been approved by the Review Committee, and fulfills the requirements for the Master of Arts in Special Education degree

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ABSTRACT

Transition Curriculum for Vessey Leadership Academy

Leadership Application Project

Paul Terrence Gruber

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Leadership Application Project (EDC 585)

Research indicates students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) struggle with their transition from high school onward. Students who once received services, now on their own, are left poorly equipped for success. Studies show these students often have low rates of participation in post-secondary schooling, high rates of unemployment, and high rates of incarceration or involvement in crime. Though studies show these young adults struggle after high school, very programs have been implemented to improve their chances for success. The following Leadership Application Project (LAP) was developed in an effort to create a transition curriculum for Vessey Leadership Academy, a school in West St. Paul, Minnesota, that serves a large population of students who are labeled with EBD. This study contains a project proposal, a literature review of related studies, a description of the process the author went through to create the LAP project, a description of the curriculum, a critical assessment of the project, a critical reflection of the author's growth as an educator through completion of this project, and finally, a section of future implications for use of the project at Vessey Leadership Academy.

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Statement of the Problem

Vessey Academy, in West St. Paul, is a small charter school currently in the fourth year of operation. As most charter schools have a niche that separates them from other schools, Vessey is unique, being the only public Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) Military Academy in Minnesota. Vessey Academy opened its doors (at the Phalen Recreation Center in East St. Paul for the first two years) in the fall of 2004. Vessey Academy's original mission was to serve 'at risk' students, and being the only public military academy in the state, they have done exactly that. According to the staff and parent testimonials, many of the students who attend Vessey were sent to this school because they had disciplinary problems at their previous schools. Thirty percent of Vessey Academy students receive special education services, the majority of these students having emotional behavioral disorders. Students that receive free and reduced lunch are often classified as 'at risk' (Donnelly, 1987). Approximately 70% of Vessey students currently receive free and reduced lunch.

Like other charter schools, Vessey Academy's first three years have not come without trials and tribulations. The first year, teachers taught classes in a large gymnasium without walls separating classrooms, there was a lack of curriculum for all students, and special education services were virtually non-existent, though many of the students qualified for services. The second year, the teachers created a curriculum over the summer; however, special education services were still virtually non-existent, and classes were still taught in a gymnasium. By the third year, Vessey was able to locate an official school building, curriculum was fairly well established, and the school began to focus on creating a viable special education program, spending much time solely catching up on back paperwork. However, serving a large 'at risk' and EBD population, the school still lacked a transition program. Over the summer, approaching the 2007-2008 school-year, the faculty decided to allocate a 25-minute advisory period into the

school day. The advisory hour has been successful helping students understand their current credit status. It has been used to help students prepare for the Basic Standards Test (BST), and it has been used to implement other various projects, such as dance committee, yearbook committee, and a community service project group. During the 2007-2008 school year, the Special Education Program, now caught up with paperwork, began to implement some transition services; however, no clear transition program had been established.

As a focus has been placed on transition at a federal level, it became imperative that Vessey develop a transition curriculum for special education students. In 1975 Congress adopted the Education for all Handicapped Act (later called The Individuals with Disabilities Act) (IDEA), ensuring a free and appropriate education for all school-age children in the United States. Congress has amended the Act several times since 1975. The most recent amendment, in 2004, focused a great deal of attention on the implementation of transition services. By the United States Department of Education definition, transition services are educational processes that focus on improving achievement of students with disabilities and facilitating their movement from high school to post-high school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, employment, adult education, disability services, supported independent living, and community participation. In Minnesota, these processes must begin by age 14 (IDEA, 2004). As the mandate is quite recent, no state standards or set curriculum are in place; whereas such standards and curricula are required for every other high school subject area.

Presently, transition curricula are entirely constructed by each school's special education teachers with no oversight or guidance as to what instruments may best serve the students. For many adolescents, the transition from high school presents opportunity for advancement in education, employment, and independence. For students with emotional behavioral disorders

(EBD), this is a time at which structures and supports end abruptly at graduation and these young adults are left poorly equipped to achieve any positive post-secondary outcomes. The high school diploma, for an EBD student, hardly guarantees success in post-secondary school or employment. A recent study regarding transition for EBD students demonstrated that students with labels of emotional behavioral disorders tend to struggle after high school, without services, whether they have a diploma or not (Wood & Cronin, 1999). Most youth with EBD have deficits with social, behavioral, academic, and vocational skills. Without remediation during their transition age, studies have shown that these young adults have a high rate of unemployment, a high incidence of participation in illegal activity, and in general, an inability to function on their own as adults (Malloy, Cheney, & Cormier, 1998).

Research regarding students with EBD thus far has been centered on the elementary age. Few studies have focused on developing positive transition outcomes for students with EBD (Lane & Carter, 2006). The research that has been completed with respect to this sub-population, has demonstrated the importance of developing positive outside supports, (particularly in the area of workplace support, community linkage, family involvement, and student involvement) in achieving positive outcomes (Carter & Lunsford, 2005).
Though only 30% of the students at Vessey have a special education label, many of the regular education students also have difficulty in school and share many of the same problems as the students who carry special education labels. This being said, many of the statistics applied to transition studies for students with emotional behavioral disorders will be applied to all of the students at Vessey.

This Community Action project developed a transition curriculum for the special education program at Vessey Academy that was first implemented during 2008-2009 school

year. The majority of the curriculum will also be used with the rest of the mainstream population at Vessey. The conductor of this project intends to design a curriculum centering on the following transition topics:

1. Social Skills:
2. Vocational Skills:
3. Post-Secondary Guidance and Career Exploration:
4. Self-Determination Skills:
5. Self-Determination Skills for Special Education Students/Self-Directed IEP:
6. Home Living Skills:
7. Community Participation:
8. Awareness of Post-Secondary Support Services:
9. Awareness of Recreation and Leisure Opportunities:

Literature Review

This literature review includes an analysis of eight empirical studies published between 1998 and 2006. The articles focus on transitional outcomes for students with emotional behavioral disorders (EBD) and outcomes of interventions that have been used to support the transition to adulthood for these students. Many researchers have studied children in special education programs; however, most of these studies have focused on students with learning disabilities (LD). All of the following studies iterate the lack of success in transition outcomes for students with EBD labels and the need for further research in this area. Several of the authors call for more evidence-based interventions to increase success rates for students with EBD as they transition from high school to a post-high school setting. There is an excess of literature empirically demonstrating failure rates in students with EBD; however, few studies provide answers for this problem. In fact, this literature review only contains four evidence-based transition interventions for youth with EBD.

Outcome Studies for Students with EBD

Transition into adulthood can be difficult for young adults with EBD. Positive outcomes for students with EBD occur at a much lower rate than for students in the general education population and students labeled with other disabilities (ie. Learning Disabilities and Developmental Cognitive Disabilities) (Wagner & Davis, 2006). The research of both Zigmond (2006) and Armstrong, Dedrick, & Greenbaum (2003) reports high failure rates in student transition for EBD students, in the area of employment, independence, and post-secondary schooling, as well as a high incarceration rates.

Zigmond (2006) conducted an interview-based analysis of ninety-seven students, 57 graduates and 40 drop-outs who were being served in day treatment EBD programs, in a mid-

sized Midwestern metropolitan region. The interviews were administered yearly while students were in high school and at three, six, 12, 18, and 24 months after students completed or dropped out of high school. These interviews focused on respondents' views of adult services, aspirations, current levels of education and employment. He compared responses of graduates and dropouts. At the end of three-year study, data was obtained on 33 of the original 97 students, 27 graduates, and six drop-outs. The study concluded that although most of the students (both drop-outs and graduates) held jobs or attended post-secondary school, all the participants suffered from a very low level of stability. Many of the individuals only held part-time jobs and attended short-term, job-specific post-secondary training courses. The study found that there was not a significant difference in outcomes between these graduates and drop-outs with EBD.

Armstrong et al. (2003) used data from the seven-year Longitudinal National Adolescent and Child Treatment Study. Specifically, the study looked at outcomes in education, employment, residential opportunities, social support networks, and community adjustment for students with EBD. Unlike Zigmond's (2006) work, this study used a larger sample drawing data from a previous study cohort (Greenbaum & Dedrick, 1996). In this study (Greenbaum & Dedrick, 1996), 812 students, ages eight to 18, who were currently either being educated in mental health centers or in special education programs for students with severe emotional disturbances were sampled. Data was collected annually over a period of seven years. Armstrong et al. (2003) used the subsample of their previous study, reviewing students who were between the ages of 12 and 18. Two hundred ninety-two students, from six different states, and 121 different sites, (94 special education facilities and 27 mental health facilities), participated in the final study. The researchers examined student strength and deficit-based behaviors as they

transitioned from adolescence to adulthood. They examined six different areas including, education, employment, residence, social support network, self-reported and caretaker-reported satisfaction. They then combined the six categories into an overall Index of Community Adjustment. The results were similar to the previous study (Zigmond, 2006). At the end of the seven-year study, the students demonstrated: 1.) low employment success, with 42% unemployed, and 2.) low success with post-secondary education, with only 4% having more than a high-school diploma. This study also suggested that the majority of the students had not gained independence, and reported a 10% incarceration rate. Unlike Zigmond (2006), Armstrong et al. (2003) used testing data to determine changes in strength-based and deficit-based behaviors that would serve as indicators for success outcomes. Students were pre-tested and post-tested for changes in adaptive behaviors and academic achievement in arithmetic. The adaptive scales were measured by student interviews using several existing scales: Hollingshead's (1975) *Index of Social Status* for educational status, Hollingshead's (1975) *Two Factor Scale of Occupations* and Morgan and Duncan's (1982) *Socioeconomic Index* for education, *Restrictiveness of Living Environmental Scale* (Hawkins, Almeida, Fabry, & Reitz, 1992) for residential status, *Dunst Social Support Scale* (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988) for social support, and Cronbach alpha for quantifying self-reported satisfaction, and lastly,VABS, 297-item semi-structured interview for care taker reports. Academic achievement in arithmetic was measured using *The Wide Range Achievement Test Revised* (WRAT-R; Jastak & Wilkinson, 1984). The study (Armstrong et al., 2003) reported the strongest positive correlation with successful outcomes in community adjustment was not with an increase in academic behaviors, but rather with an increase in adaptive behaviors. The authors (Armstrong et al., 2003) conclude that there is a need for students to develop pro-social skills in order to transition successfully.

Both studies point to lack of successful outcomes for students with emotional behavioral disorders. Zigmond (2006) stressed that success rates were not dependent upon completion of high school. This suggests academic success is not necessarily an indicator of a successful transition into adulthood for students with emotional behavior disorders. The second study (Armstrong et al., 2003) also implies that secondary curriculum for students with disabilities should involve training in adaptive behavior skills, rather than focusing only on the normal academic curriculum.

There are several limitations to these studies. The first study (Zigmond, 2006) suffered high losses to follow-up. The study began with 97 students, with an equal distribution between those who graduated and those who dropped out of school. Failure to stay in contact with students limited their final results to only 33 students and a disproportionate number of graduates compared to drop-outs. It is likely that the students who exhibited the greatest degree of failure in community adjustment were lost to follow up and were no longer included in the study. This would likely diminish the differences between groups and could explain the lack of statistical significance found between the groups. The second study (Armstrong et al., 2003) also demonstrated high losses to follow-up over its seven year duration. Again, dealing with a population that is prone to problems, it is likely that the students who the researchers were not able to contact, fit into a category of the lowest success rate outcomes.

Youth Perceptions vs. Adult Perceptions and a Lack of Skills

Successful outcomes for students with EBD are heavily dependent upon job success and on the students' own self-determination and involvement in planning and monitoring their own goals (Carter, Lane, Peirson, & Glaeser, 2006). The following studies, conducted by Carter, (Carter & Wehby, 2003) (Carter, Lane, Peirson, & Glaeser, 2006) measure the students' self-

assessment of these skills compared to the assessment of the same skill by adults in their lives (parents, job-supervisors, and teachers). Like the previous two studies, these studies also compared outcomes for EBD students with outcomes for students with other disabilities.

Carter & Wehby, (2003) assessed whether the job performance of students with EBD met the expectations of their supervisors and whether supervisors' and adolescents' evaluation of work performance behaviors differed. This was a questionnaire-based study in which 47 students with EBD, from 11 different schools, within a large urban district, working for 47 different employers, completed questionnaires. Each employer also completed a questionnaire. The questionnaires revolved around employment skills performance, task-related social behavior, and non-task related social behavior. Questions related to taking constructive criticism, asking directions, and responding to joking and humor. The questionnaire consisted of four sections: 1.) participant information 2.) employment skills performance, 3.) employment skills importance, 4.) job satisfaction. The authors further divided the questionnaires into sub-sections. Demographic information and a job description were assessed in the employment section. A Likert-type scale and was sub-divided into four domains: a.) task-related social behaviors, b.) non-task related social behaviors, c.) work performance behaviors, and d.) general work behaviors, rating employment skills performance. Another likert-type scale, comprised of 50 questions, was used to rate employment skills performance. An existing scale, developed by Warr, Cook, and Wall (1979) was used to assess job satisfaction. A literature review that addressed employment expectations for disabled individuals (Carter & Wehby) was conducted to aid in the development of the questions.

The results obtained suggested that supervisor ratings were significantly lower than student ratings of task and non-task related social behaviors, work performance, and general

work behaviors. Adolescents rated their own job performance higher than the supervisors rated them. The adolescents and supervisors also differed in their ratings of job-skill importance. This study indicated that adolescents with EBD are not only not meeting the expectations of their supervisors but also perceive their own success inaccurately.

Much like the first study (Carter & Wehby, 2003), the second study (Carter et al., 2006), compared student interpretations of themselves with the perceptions of adults; however, this study also compared students with EBD to students with students with learning disabilities. This study attempts to ascertain the self-determination prospects of adolescents with EBD, how students with EBD and LD compare in self-determined behaviors, to what extent educators, parents, and students share views of adolescents capabilities in the area of self-determination, and to what extent students are given the opportunity to engage in self-determined behaviors while at home or at school. In regards to this study, self-determined behaviors are considered to be characterized by a students' ability to play a prominent role in their educational and life planning, by understanding their strengths and needs, setting goals, advocating for themselves, and assessing their own outcomes. For the purpose of this study, 85 high school special education students were surveyed, 39 students with EBD, and 46 students with learning disabilities. Students, teachers, and parents were surveyed using the *American Institute of Research (AIR) Self-Determination scale. The AIR Self-Determination Scale* (Wolman, Campeau, DuBois, Mithaug, & Stolarski, 1994) is a scale that has been used to measure students' capacity for, and opportunity to engage in self-determined behavior. The *AIR scale* is comprised of five sections that fall under two categories. The first is the *capacity to self-determine*. Eighteen items further divided into three domains: 1.) ability to perform self-determined behaviors such as goal setting 2.) perceptions of the efficacy of students' self-

determined behaviors, including motivation to set goals and, 3.) knowledge about self-determination and the behavior it requires, comprise the first scale. The second category is the opportunity to self-determine. This scale consists of 12 items, divided into two parallel sections: 1.) at home, and 2.) at school. The scales vary slightly for each respondent (educators, students, and parents). Reliability and validity tests were conducted before the questionnaires were administered.

This study (Carter et al., 2006) found that adolescents with EBD were judged by adults to have limited capacity to engage in self-determined behavior. Much like the other reviewed studies, students with EBD scored at a lower level than students with LD. There were also disparities in the evaluations of opportunities for students with EBD and students LD to engage in self-determined behaviors. Students with EBD also tended to rate themselves higher in their ability to engage in self-determined behaviors than parents or teachers saw their ability to do this. This study indicates that students with EBD lack the ability to engage in self-determined behaviors and thus should be trained to do so.

Both of the above studies, conducted by Carter, discuss the importance of EBD-specific curricula. Based on these studies, though students view themselves as having the knowledge to perform job tasks and to engage in self-determined behaviors, the adults in their lives did not agree with their assessment. Therefore, there is a need to teach adolescents with EBD 'soft skills' needed for the workplace. Students also need to be taught self-determining skills such as advocating for themselves and should be given the opportunity to engage in these skills at home, at work, and at school.

Both of these studies are not without limitations. The first study (Carter & Wehby, 2003) points out a few limitations, noting the study only included individuals that were somewhat

successful at work. Students with EBD who lost their jobs and are not able to maintain gainful employment could not be included in the study. The authors of this study set criteria for participants in this study. Students included in the final sample needed to be employed for a minimum of a month. Those who were fired or quit their job before that period were not included in the study. Also, this study did not compare a separate sample of students to the students with EBD. The previously noted studies compared students with EBD to students with LD or students without labels. The first study (Carter & Wehby, 2003) could have included another sample of students to make comparisons with the students with EBD. The second study (Carter et al., 2006) also contained limitations. First, the method for which self-determination was measured, *the AIR Self-Determination scale*, was tested showing that it had a strong degree of reliability and validity; however, as the author pointed out, more than one measure could have been used to obtain more accurate results. Research in the field of special education generally contains multiple forms of assessment, whereas this study only contains one.

Intervention Methods

The work of Zigmond (2006) and Armstrong et al. (2003) present evidence of negative transitional outcomes. Carter (Carter & Wehby, 2003) & (Carter et al., 2006) demonstrates a discordance between student and adult views on acceptable behaviors on the job and on their own self-determination. All of these studies suggest a need for intervention to assist with the transition to adulthood for students with EBD. We next move to reviewing the few intervention studies that have been conducted in this area. The three following studies have all attempted and tested a form of intervention for students with EBD during transition to adulthood. One of the three studies analyzes the success of seven different transitional interventions, including,

interagency collaboration, a topic directly related to the proposed study by the author of this review.

The first study (Hager, Cheney, Malloy, 1999) reviewed was an assessment of the success of a transition program started in Manchester, New Hampshire in 1995. Eighteen adolescents with EBD, ages 16 to 22, were enrolled in the program: Project RENEW (Rehabilitation, Empowerment, Natural Supports, Education, and Work), for two years or more. The program used seven training components, including personal futures planning, flexible high school programming, employment support, interagency collaboration, mentoring, social skill building, and individualized and flexible resources. The participants who enrolled in this program completed questionnaires upon entering the program and also at six-month intervals as they continued through the program. The questionnaires assessed the students' satisfaction levels in the areas of housing, education, employment, physical health, ability to handle problems, and progress toward life goals. A Wilcoxian signed-rank test, broken into three categories: 1.) school data, 2.) job data, and 3.) all other departments, measured the satisfaction or students. Satisfaction levels rose at a .05 level in all areas, during the course of the study. Success was also measured with individual student data, reviewing current school and work progress, and calculated based on student police and court involvement. The study recorded success rates, with 61% of the students working after two years in the program, and 83% having worked at some time during the program, though most of the students were working part-time, low-paying jobs, a statistic similar to the previous examined follow up studies. However, with an intervention method, Project RENEW students showed more post-secondary educational success with all but one of the high school graduates enrolling in post-secondary education programs, and compared to Zigmond's study (2006), these students were enrolled in more long-

term college programs including bachelor's and associates programs. When comparing this intervention, to Armstrong et al.'s longitudinal study (2003), where only 4% of the 292 students had obtained more than a high school diploma, a much larger percent of the students were in the process of obtaining a post-secondary degree. In contrast to Armstong et al.'s study (2003) in which 10% of the students sampled had been incarcerated, only one of the 18 students with the RENEW intervention was incarcerated. This study (Hager et al., 99) indicates that an intervention focusing on these seven core issues may increase success measures for students with EBD labels.

The second study (Hill & Coufal, 2005) analyzed the success on transition to adulthood, of a social skills instruction, used with students labeled with EBD. This study was conducted at a day treatment center in Omaha, Nebraska, that serves youth with EBD, ages five to 21 years old. This study used a social skills curriculum called, Skill Streaming. In Skill Streaming, students read and memorize skills, define skills, model skills, role-play, provide feedback, and complete homework. This curriculum was administered five days per week, for 45 minutes per day. Twenty-three students with EBD, ranging from 11 to 17 years old, participated. The research design was an ex-post-facto three-group study design, measuring changes over time in the students' disruptive behaviors, using observation and a pre/post-test comparison. Three groups were used in the study, divided based on their amount of time in the program, one group spending a year, one spending two years, and one that spent three. Groups that finished earlier exited the program and moved back into a mainstream school. The study found that those who finished the program early exhibited the fewest disruptive behaviors and had the best comparison pre/post-test outcomes. The two groups that were examined for two or three years did not exhibit significant change in their behaviors or in their pre/post-test outcomes.

The third study (Karpur, Clark, Caproni, & Sterner, 2005) evaluated transition outcomes for students enrolled in the steps-to-success program, a program implemented at a Technical and Vocational school in Miami-Dade County. The Steps-to-Success program uses seven guidelines: engaging youth in person-centered planning, tailored services and supports, development of personal choice, safety-net of support, enhanced promotion of self-sufficiency, community support, and partnership with parents. The study compared outcomes for students in the Steps-to-Success program with students without special education classifications and with students classified with EBD but without the Steps-to-Success program. Sixty-eight students were enrolled in the Steps-to-Success program; however 43 were included in the final analysis. Like the previous studies, the outcomes measured included, employment, enrollment in post-secondary schools, productivity index, and the amount of students incarcerated or on controlled release. The comparison results indicated that among students with EBD, those in the Steps-to-Success program had three times the rate of post-secondary enrollment than the students without the program. They also scored slightly higher in productivity index, and there were fewer students who had been incarcerated. The students in the Steps-to-Success program did however have a lower employment rate than those without the program. The authors believed that this was due to the much higher rate of students in post-secondary enrollment. When compared to the non-classified students, those with disabilities had lower post-secondary enrollment, lower employment rates, a lower productivity index, and a higher rate of incarceration. Though students with EBD, given Steps-to-Success, fared better than the students with EBD without intervention, they still did far worse than non-labeled students.

All three of the above studies have significance in the creation of curriculum for EBD classified students. Students with EBD need a curriculum embedded with social skills training,

interagency collaboration, self-determination, and job supports. The success of the three above programs all indicate that students labeled with EBD need a curriculum that goes beyond the regular academic model that is used with most high school students.

All three of the studies have limitations. In the study conducted by Hager et al. (1999), the successful outcomes were very high when compared to the longitudinal study conducted by Armstrong et al. (2003); however, the sample was also much smaller (18 students). Perhaps, the one on one attention afforded to a small group of eighteen could account for the higher success rate observed in this study. The study (Hager et al., 1999) was also conducted at one center in New Hampshire, whereas the previous studies used larger sample bases. Armstrong et al.'s (2003) study, for example, spanned six states and Zigmond (2006) studied multiple high school and educational centers. The second study (Hill & Caufal, 2005) also contained limitations. The three study groups were assigned based on their time in the program. Students only enrolled in the program for one year showed the most success and were thus transferred out of the program. Students that stayed in the program longer remained in the program because they were not having success and were not deemed ready to enter back into the mainstream. These students likely had higher needs before entering the program and should not be compared to students that likely entered the program with fewer needs. This is an invalid comparison. The final study (Karpur, et al, 2005) contained the largest sample and had the widest range of comparison, using both non-labeled students, and students with EBD with and without interventions; however, 43 students may still be a small sample size. All of the above studies also involved programs that served students outside of a mainstream school, in mental health centers (Hill & Coufal, 2005), and in vocational or technical schools (Hager et al, 98) (Karpur et.al., 2005).

Best Practices

All of the previous studies point to a need for improved transition curriculum for students with EBD. The outcome studies (Zigmond et al., 2006) (Armstrong et al., 2003) indicate students with EBD have little success with their transition to adulthood whether they graduate or drop out of high school. The studies suggest stronger best practices in teaching methods for students with EBD. The studies reviewed in the youth perceptions versus adult perceptions and lack of skills (Carter & Wehby, 2003) (Carter et al., 2006) suggest a need for improved social skills curriculum and stronger student involvement in their own special education plan. The studies indicate a need for improved curriculum to strengthen self-determined behaviors in students with EBD. The Intervention Methods studies (Hager et al., 1999) (Hill & Caufal, 2005) (Karpur et al., 2005) provide a small sample of methods used to implement a curriculum including, social skills training, interagency collaboration, self-determination, and job supports. The final study examined (Wagner & Davis, 2006) in this literature review provides an example of best practices used to help mitigate a successful transition into adulthood for students with EBD.

In this final study, Wagner and Davis (2006) identify five practices that help students have successful high school experiences and a strong transition into adulthood. This study is a part of a larger study The National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS2) (Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, & Epstein, 2005). The NLTS2 is a current study funded by the United States Department of Education. The study involves a large, nationally representative sample of students receiving special education who were ages 13 through s16 and in at least seventh grade on December 1, 2000. The intention of the research is to document experiences of these youth as they move from secondary school to adulthood. Adolescents participating in the study receive special education services from each of the twelve special education categories. Information has

been collected in four waves as students move through secondary school into their adulthood transition. Documentation has been collected through a variety of methods, including, parent/guardian interviews, youth interviews, teacher surveys, school program surveys, school characteristic surveys, student's assessments, and transcripts. At the time of this review, data was currently being collected in the fourth wave.

For the purpose of this study (Wagner & Davis, 2006) 1,077 students with EBD were sampled, using the data from the NLTS2 (Wagner et al., 2005). The intention was to look at the extent to which five dimensions of best practices helped students have successful transition experiences. The five evaluated practices were: 1.) relationships 2.) rigor, 3.) relevance, 4.) attention to the whole child, and 5.) involving students and families in goal-driven transition planning. Students in the sample were compared with students from other disability categories.

For the practice of relationships, results indicated students with EBD received a large amount of support from teachers; however, they did not typically attend school in their neighborhood and were thus not able to create and maintain relationships with peers. When compared with students from other disability categories, students with EBD were reported to get along with teachers and students at a significantly lower rate. The report concluded that schools need to increase intensive supports with social skills training, conflict resolution, peer mentors, and family support, so students can form stronger relationships with peers in the general education setting.

Results from the category of rigor indicated students with EBD are generally enrolled in academically rigorous programs; however, they typically have the lowest grade point averages when compared with students from all other disability categories. According to the study, students with EBD typically receive limited supports, modifications, and adaptations, when

compared with other disabled students. The authors suggest students need more supports, tutoring, and small group instruction.

Review of relevance and teaching connected to the whole child suggests students need "authentic learning," or better put, instruction focused on student transition to adulthood. Employment, including, workplace behaviors, occupational skills, and career exploration should be central to the educational experience for students with EBD. The study (Wagner & Davis, 2006) implies there has been a lack of effort to do this on the behalf of current programs. The authors recommend training staff about mental health services so they are able to work with students who struggle emotionally and behaviorally.

Another best practice suggested by the authors of this study was involving students and families in goal-driven transition planning. According to the study, though transition services were mandatory, during the 2001-2002 school year only 89% of EBD students received these services. Findings were similar for students in other disability categories. The authors of this study stress the importance of early transition planning that is student centered, especially for students with EBD since they have higher drop-out rates than students from any other disability category. The study also emphasizes how critical it is that students play a part in this process.

Though this study has relevance, including comparisons with other disability categories, there are also limitations. Information gathered during the NLTS2 study did not pertain directly to EBD students, but rather to all disability groups. Therefore, the questions used to gather information were not catered toward gathering EBD specific information. The NLTS2 study was described by the authors (Wagner et al., 2005) as "big picture" study. Individual studies could be conducted for each individual disability category, using language specific to each disability.

Summary of Literature Review

In summary, this review indicates further research is necessary, and that students with EBD need a more complete transition curriculum in order to increase their success outcomes, especially for students served in mainstream settings. The National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS2) (Wagner et al., 2005) found that 74% of students with EBD attended a general education school, yet all of the reviewed studies took place in mental health center or a special facility for students with EBD. Transition programs for students educated within mainstream schools need to be developed and tested.

A Description of the Process in which the Candidate Engaged to Accomplish the Project

During the fall of 2006, I was offered a position at Vessey Leadership Academy as the Special Education Coordinator. At the time, I was already working at Vessey as a social studies teacher. I took over a program that was virtually non-existent. There was a backlog of evaluations and IEP plans to complete. There was virtually no curriculum, and to make matters worse, I was not formally trained in the field of special education. I had my work cut out for me. I enrolled in the master's program at Augsburg for special education and slowly began to build a program at Vessey. As I struggled through my first two years, it became very apparent to me that although students were graduating and passing classes, very few of them were successful or even functional. Many graduates were jobless, still living at home, and not attending any post-secondary programs. Most of the students were still having severe emotional and behavioral problems. In fact, they were probably worse off than in high school since they had no support services and no means for finding help. I realized the necessity of building a strong transition program at Vessey.

After completion of my special education licensure courses, in the spring of 2008, I began working on the research for my master's thesis. Through my research, it occurred to me that the struggles I had witnessed with my students were not uncommon. Students with emotional and behavioral are rarely successful after high school. A high school diploma hardly translated to success. Students struggle after high school, and with a lack of support, do not stand a chance. There is strong evidence supporting a need for implementation of transition services; however, there are very few, pre-existing, proven and successful transition programs focusing directly on the needs of students who struggle with emotional and behavioral disorders.

I decided to create a transition curriculum for the students at Vessey Leadership Academy as a part of my Leadership Application Project (LAP).

I completed my literature review in the spring of 2008 and submitted my LAP proposal. Using my literature review, I formed transition curriculum categories. The categories were based on federally mandated requirements: home living, community participation, recreation and leisure, employment, and post-secondary enrollment. Beyond these, my research suggested there should be a sixth category. In reviewing prior studies, it was evident that students with emotional behavior disorders struggled because they were not able to engage in self-determined behaviors. (Carter, et al., 2006) They were not active in the IEP process. I added a sixth category focusing specifically on self-determination skills. In addition, current research also suggests that students with EBD are deficient in social skills. Since social skills are needed for all areas of transition, I added another category explicitly devoted to these skills. Lastly, a category was added for post-secondary support services. As mentioned, after leaving high school, students who have previous relied on their case managers, have no support and no knowledge of existing support centers for adults with disabilities. The final category, then, was one dedicated to increasing graduate awareness of post-secondary support.

The number of curriculum categories could very well be endless but in the end I narrowed the curriculum to nine categories. I further clarified each category by a list of objectives. At this point, I made my first visit to the Osseo Secondary Transition Center in Maple Grove Minnesota, a center that serves students, ages eighteen to twenty-one, with continued educational needs. I met with Christine Peper, a transition teacher, who helped me develop my curriculum. Ms. Peper directed me to a list of curriculum resources. She gave me resources already in use at the transition center. I was also able to tour the transition center and

view a list of courses taught at the school. After the meeting, as advised by Ms. Peper, I visited Free Spirit Press, located in Downtown Minneapolis and purchased a set of transition texts. I began formulating a list of necessary objectives to serve as a lesson plan guide for my curriculum. Many of the objectives came from these resources and from the material I gathered during my visit at the Osseo Secondary Transition Center. After formulating a list of objectives, I sent the list to my advisor, Donna Patterson (Augsburg Special Education Instructor), and to my readers, Christine Peper, and Claud Allaire (Lead Teacher at Vessey Leadership Academy) for review. I received feedback and revised the list of objectives accordingly.

During the summer of 2008, I wrote lesson plans for each objective. Ideas for lessons were generated using resources gathered both at the Osseo Secondary Transition Center, and from the texts from Free Spirit Press. Other ideas for lessons came from web searches and from information gathered from my father, Terry Gruber, the Job Placement Director at the St. Cloud Technical College. I modified all lessons to fit the target population at Vessey Leadership Academy and completed them by the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year. I gave copies of lessons to every teacher at Vessey for use during the advisory hour. I also gave copies to my advisor, Ms. Patterson, and to Ms. Peper for review and implemented their feedback and suggestions. Twenty-five to 30 more lessons were added in accordance to the suggested revisions from the readers.

During the school-year of 2008-2009, the lessons were taught by all teachers at Vessey during the 25 minute advisory period. I also taught the lessons during a 55 minute Life Skills course. During this time, I received feedback from teachers and also took extensive notes on of the effectiveness as I taught the lessons. After revision of the lessons, I submitted a second copy to Ms. Peper and Ms. Patterson, and again implemented their suggestions.

A Description of the Final Product

The completed transition curriculum consists of 154 objectives found within 100 lesson plans. Each of the 154 objectives is represented in one or more lesson plans. All lessons use the following format:

1. Topic title:
Target Grade:

2. Purpose/Objectives/Outcomes:

3. Assessment of student's outcomes:

4. Materials/resources/technology:
The teacher will need:
Students will need:

5. Instructional Strategies/Accommodations and student activities:
Introduction:
Motivation:
Step-by-step:
Self Evaluation Assessment:

All assessments are written using standard IEP goal language (ie. The student will improve their problem solving skills moving from a current level of not knowing the steps needed for problem solving to a level of stating the four steps needed for problem solving while viewing a list). Modifications and accommodations for students with disabilities are made as needed. Lesson plans contain options including a role-play, writing, verbal, or non-verbal activities. Since the lesson plans are written specifically for Vessey Leadership Academy, they are catered toward the typical Vessey student.

Each lesson begins with an introduction. Generally, the introductions are informal conversations about the topic. The introductions are intended to get students thinking about and discussing their experience with the topic at hand. After the introduction, all lessons contain a step-by-step plan that is easy to follow. The plans use conversation, journaling, worksheets,

readings, written activities, online searches, formal and informal assessment, and role-play. All lessons have been structured and adapted to fit the needs of the traditional student found at Vessey Leadership Academy.

The end of each lesson contains a self-evaluation assessment. Lessons are used by all Vessey teachers. Since each teacher has their own unique style and lessons contain options, it is important for each teacher to reflect on the lesson, after it is taught, so they will know what to change the next time they teach the lesson. Each teacher has a bound copy of the curriculum, so they are free to take notes on their own personal copy.

The curriculum is presented in a bound copy for the use of each teacher. Lessons and objectives are divided into nine categories. The categories are presented as follows (numbers in parenthesis indicate the number of lesson plan in each category):

1. Social Skills (23)
2. Vocational Skills (16)
3. Post-Secondary Guidance and Career Exploration (8)
4. Self-Determination Skills (4)
5. Self-Determination Skills for Special Education Students/Self-Directed IEP (15)
6. Home Living Skills (19)
7. Community Participation (5)
8. Awareness of Post-Secondary Support Services (3)
9. Awareness of Recreation and Leisure Opportunities (7)

The majority of the lesson plans may be taught to both regular and special education students. As mentioned, many of the students at Vessey Leadership have behavioral difficulties, and the curriculum is especially designed with this in mind. Therefore, at the beginning of the 2008-2009 school-year, all teachers, regular education and special education, would begin using the curriculum. However, the Self-Determination Skills for Special Education Students/Self-Directed IEP (15 lessons) will only be taught to students who have an IEP.

As students move through each curriculum, they will keep pertinent materials in a portfolio. When students graduate, they will be able to take their portfolio with them. The idea of creating a portfolio came from Ms. Peper. As Ms. Peper explained, at the Osseo Transition Center each student creates a File Master (kept in a portable plastic file case). At Vessey, we modified the file master. Each student has a binder containing the following categories:

1. Education
2. Financial
3. Personal
4. Vocational
5. Medical
6. Support Services
7. Residence
8. Accomplishments
9. Recreation
10. Transportation

As students complete documents, receive lists, or obtain new information, the materials are placed accordingly in their portfolio. For example, a copy of their resume, cover letter, or thank you letter, etc. would be placed in the vocational section. The student portfolio will be kept in the resource room throughout their stay at Vessey Leadership Academy. By the time each student graduates, their portfolio should be filled with necessary documents.

In completed form, this project consists of one hundred lesson plans, found within nine categories, addressing 154 objectives. The student piece of the project consists of a portfolio contained in a binder. The finished project is available for viewing at Vessey Leadership Academy.

A Critical Assessment of the Impact and Quality of the Final Product and its Potential Contribution to Educational Context/Use for which it was Developed

A critical assessment of the final product was conducted via several methods. First, all teachers at the school were given a copy of the curriculum and were instructed to use the curriculum over the course of the year. Feedback was gathered from all teachers (see attached survey in Appendix). Second, the curriculum was used within the special education department this year. Results can be judged by progress made within the special education program. Lastly, this assessment will include possible changes that could improve the effectiveness of implementation of this program.

At the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year, each teacher was given a copy of the curriculum. The intention was to teach the curriculum during a 25 minute advisory period falling in the middle of the school-day. Teachers were given the curriculum in August, during staff development week, the week before school started. Only one hour was dedicated toward preparing the teachers for use of the curriculum. Though the curriculum was widely accepted among the special education staff, many of the mainstream teachers were apprehensive. Regular education teachers gave numerous responses regarding the curriculum. First, some teachers commented that the curriculum pulled them from their comfort level. Teachers who went to school to teach math or science did not feel it was their job to teach social skills and job skills. Others complained too little time was spent training teachers on how to use the curriculum. Summer staff development is only one week long and many topics must be covered in this week. Little time could be dedicated solely to the transition curriculum.

Questionnaires also revealed there is a general consensus among staff that the 25-minute advisory period is not effective. Advisory hour has only been in operation for two years thus far and is still in an early evolutionary period. One teacher commented not all instructors take

advisory seriously, so it is difficult for him to teach lessons because students complain about doing work during this hour. The students argued that their friends, who have other teachers, do not have to do work during advisory, so they didn't feel they should have to do it either. Some teachers admitted they had not used the curriculum because they did not feel comfortable teaching a curriculum of this sort and felt advisory wound up being 25 minutes of babysitting. I admit, teaching the curriculum during advisory has not been as effective as teaching it during my regularly assigned 55-minute Life Skills course. It is not so much the matter of the amount of time as it is the students' expectations of advisory hour. In this respect, teachers' comments are accurate. Without having the full staff on board with advisory there will continue to be struggles for those who do choose to administer the curriculum.

This project's strongest contribution can be seen in the progress made this year within the Special Education Department at Vessey Leadership Academy. Transition is a necessary and required aspect of special education. Nearly all charter schools lack a transition program. Vessey Leadership Academy now has a viable transition program. This has changed the whole process of holding IEP meetings, writing goals, and teaching lessons. As mentioned, the transition curriculum is broken into nine sections. Students who have a deficiency in any of the nine categories now have the opportunity to complete a curriculum that addresses their needs within a particular department. For example, students who have a goal of attending college, finding a job, and finding an apartment of their own, would complete the Post Secondary, Employment, Home Living, and Self-Determination skills portion of the curriculum. Parents may view a list of objectives for each curriculum during their child's yearly IEP meeting, or during our yearly Special Education Parental Advisory Committee meeting. The IEP team is able to determine if the student has needs in any of the nine categories.

Goal writing is now simplified. In the past, each transition goal comprised of an uncategorized list of objectives. To make matters worse, with no curriculum, objectives were rarely addressed or met. This curriculum allows each objective to be stated as a completion of a one of nine categories. For example, the IEP team may determine a student requires guidance in independent living skills. Rather than listing numerous objectives in the IEP, one objective may be written: "Johnny will complete the Vessey home living curriculum at a 90% success rate." Success can be measured in completion of each lesson plan's assessment. For the first time in Vessey's special education history, objectives are being, not only addressed, and taught, but also tracked for completion. Parents are also pleased with the program. Numerous parents, who have previously enrolled their children in large district public schools, have stated their satisfaction with the program at Vessey.

Though the curriculum has been successfully taught within the special education department, alterations could be made to improve the effectiveness of the curriculum. First, rather than devoting only one hour of training for teachers, teachers could be guided through the lessons. Proper training would take at least a full day. Second, advisory hour should be modified and adjusted. All teachers need to be on board with teaching transition skills. Some teachers will need to step outside their comfort level. More teacher feedback may be needed in order to improve the format of the lessons. Teachers could also receive training related to teaching life skills and transition. More direction may need to come from the administration at the school if advisory hour is going to be successful.

A Critical Reflection on the Candidate's Experience throughout the Process of Completing the Leadership Application Project, Especially as it Relates to Leadership and Other Opportunities for Growth Experienced by the Candidate

Over the course of the last three years, I have had the opportunity to build a special education program at Vessey Academy. When I first accepted the position as special education coordinator at Vessey Leadership Academy, I was a little lost. When most teachers accept their first job, they step into an already existent program, they have a mentor, and they have a curriculum. Though I did have the advantage of knowing the school, since I was already teaching social studies, I had little knowledge of how to be a special education teacher. As previously mentioned, to make matters worse, the special education program was in rough shape. Building this program has given me opportunities that very few teachers get during the early part of their career. This thesis project has played a large role in helping my development of the special education program at Vessey, and in my development as a special education teacher. Rather than solely conducting research for my thesis, I had the opportunity of implementing a project I could put to use. I was able to execute the curriculum as I created it, allowing me a chance to test my research while I was in the process of writing it. Not having an experienced teacher on staff, I also had the opportunity to visit other schools, including the Osseo Secondary Transition Center, where I could take ideas from various ideas from teachers who all had their own philosophies and practices.

Transition and life skills are the key to a student's success. When a child enters high school, all aspects of their education should be connected to their transition out of school and their success as an adult. Education from this respect is individualized and based on the goals of each student and the goals of their parents or guardians. Over the course of the last year, I have spent hours researching this project, studying the success of available transition programs,

visiting schools that focus on transition, speaking with individuals about transition services, reading books about transition, and viewing lesson plans related to transition. This experience has been very beneficial to my growth as a teacher. When I was teaching social studies, I thoroughly enjoyed what I was doing. I enjoyed the subject matter, I liked talking in front of a large group, and I enjoyed the moments when I helped students get excited about a subject I was passionate about. However, looking back, I am not sure I was always teaching students transferrable skills. This project helped highlight the importance of relating everything I teach to a student's life after high school.

Through my initial literature review research, I learned the importance of engaging students in their own plan. According to research, lack of success for students with emotional and behavioral disorders is directly linked to student inability to engage in self-determined behaviors. In the past, I often avoided directly discussing disabilities with students. As a high school special education teacher, I often find students and their parents do not have a realistic view of their current progress. They do not understand the purpose of an IEP. They do not understand they have rights. This being said, many students who struggle behaviorally, move each year from school to school, falling further behind, having no knowledge of the personal liberties that are legally protected as part of a free and appropriate education (FAPE). Students and parents who do not understand the system often give up. I learned the importance of teaching students about their disabilities, about their rights, and about adaptations to cope with their disabilities. I was also able to view a program used at the Osseo Transition Center "the self-directed IEP." Students who complete this plan are able to lead their own IEP meeting. I took this plan, modified it, and have used it with my students. It has been amazing to see the excitement in the students who have completed this program. Students who previously refused

to attend IEP meetings are now playing a lead role. Students who take part in their plan are far more likely to want to achieve their goals and have success in school. These same students have a greater chance of having success when they leave the formal school setting. The process of completing this project has changed my whole outlook on education.

Though this project took a lot of time and effort, I am pleased with the end results. I have grown as a student and as an educator. I am proud of the progress we have made at Vessey Leadership Academy. I am pleased to have been part of creating a new school. I am honored to have played a role in creating a viable special education program at Vessey. This project is a major piece of the program. This experience has played, and will continue to play, a major role in my growth as an educator.

Future Implications for use of the LAP Project

After experiencing a full year of use, it is evident implementation of the curriculum will be an evolutionary process. It will likely take a few years to iron out the kinks in both the curriculum and the advisory program at Vessey. The curriculum itself will need modifications to include practical experiences and to add missing pieces. Lessons may be added periodically and the format of the curriculum may be adjusted accordingly as it is evaluated by teachers. The advisory program will continue to grow and adapt as Vessey grows as a school. Suggestions from teachers, other staff, and the readers of this project, are needed so the curriculum, and the advisory hour, may further evolve into a successful program.

Suggestions have already been made to include more practical assessment throughout the curriculum. Lessons could include actual experiences that would help students put the skills learned to use. For example, a work program where students could actually interview and develop job skills would help students make sense of the skills learned in the vocational section of the curriculum (ie. resumes, interviewing skills, cover letters, etc…). As Vessey grows, the school will continue to add more applicable programs to complement these lessons. In fact, next year, the school already has a plan to develop a work-experience program.

Added objectives and lessons will also be added continually, to the curriculum, as it is modified and assessed each year. For example, recently a suggestion was made by a staff member to add a section related to empowerment because a handful of students have been involved in abusive relationships. As student issues arise, and needs change, lessons will require to be added to the curriculum. Surveys should be conducted annually for future suggested lessons. As mentioned, teachers filled out a survey at the mid-point of the year, but another survey could be implemented now that the curriculum has been taught for a full year. Results of surveys could help steer future changes to the curriculum.

It is also evident that the 25-minute advisory hour must be reviewed this coming summer to help to help make it more productive. Mr. Allaire and I have already agreed to sit down over the summer and figure out how to improve the program. He has already suggested advisory may not be the best time to fully use this curriculum. He also suggested staff may need more training and guidance if they are going to make better use of the program. It will be important to receive more feedback and staff input to fully implement this curriculum as a productive program will require all staff to buy into the concept of teaching transition.

Mr. Allaire has also suggested differentiating lessons based on need. This year, the special education program broke up students into advisory groups based on grade and need. Three different teachers were given a group of students for the advisory period. Varying sections of the curriculum were taught in each advisory group based on student need. For example, it was determined there was little value teaching the home living and post-secondary portion of the curriculum to freshmen students, but it was necessary for juniors and seniors. With a smaller group this was easy to do in the special education department, but it may be more difficult with the larger group of mainstream students. Initial or pre-assessments could also be conducted with each student, at the school, to further individualize needs. Students who have already mastered certain skills may not benefit from certain sections of the curriculum, but would benefit from other parts. These assessments could be planned over the summer and conducted with each student in the fall.

Though this project has improved the advisory program at Vessey, the curriculum and the advisory is still at a building stage. Vessey is still a relatively new school and it will take time to fine tune this program. The curriculum should be reviewed annually so changes can be made. Lessons and assessments will be added and modified as the needs of the students evolve over

time. Progress has been made, but advisory still is in the initial stages and will need to be assessed periodically for improvement.

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Appendix

Teacher survey: Vessey Academy
Review of Advisory Curriculum:

General Questions:

1. What are some of the challenges you face teaching at Vessey?

2. How would you compare Vessey to others schools? Do you view Vessey as a second-chance/alternative school?

3. What are some of the struggles you see in the students we teach?

4. Why do you choose to work at Vessey?

Review of Curriculum:

1. What are your feelings on the advisory program at Vessey Academy?

2. In all honesty, have you spent time reviewing the Transition Curriculum?

3. How often do you use the transition curriculum?

4. What sections do you use most often (In the front the curriculum is divided into 11 sections)?

5. Do you think the curriculum has been helpful? Why/Why not?

6. Do you think the curriculum would be more beneficial if it were introduced in a different way (ie. If we took time to go over it during summer workshops)?

7. Do you think the lesson plans are presentable? Would they be easier to use if they were in a different format?

8. Do you believe it is necessary to teach students transitional skills during high school?

Additional Comments: